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Of Myth And Men

By Bill Moyers; George Lucas

MOYERS: Joseph Campbell once said all the great myths, the ancient great stories, have to be regenerated in every generation. He said that's what you are doing with Star Wars. You are taking these old stories and putting them into the most modern of idioms, the cinema. Are you conscious of doing that? Or are you just setting out to make a good action-movie adventure?

LUCAS: With Star Wars I consciously set about to re-create myths and the classic mythological motifs. I wanted to use those motifs to deal with issues that exist today. The more research I did, the more I realized that the issues are the same ones that existed 3,000 years ago. That we haven't come very far emotionally.

MOYERS: The mesmerizing figure in *The Phantom Menace* to me is Darth Maul. When I saw him, I thought of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* or the devil in Dante's *Inferno*. He's the Evil Other--but with powerful human traits.

LUCAS: Yes, I was trying to find somebody who could compete with Darth Vader, who is now one of the most famous evil characters. So we went back into representations of evil. Not only the Christian, but also Hindu and other religious icons, as well as the monsters in Greek mythology.

MOYERS: What did you find in all these representations?

LUCAS: A lot of evil characters have horns. [Laughs.]

MOYERS: And does your use of red suggest the flames of hell?

LUCAS: Yes. It's a motif that I've been using with the Emperor and the Emperor's minions. I mean, red is an aggressive color. Evil is aggressive.

MOYERS: Is Darth Maul just a composite of what you found in your research, or are we seeing something from your own imagination and experience?

LUCAS: If you're trying to build an icon of evil, you have to go down into the subconscious of the human race over a period of time and pull out the images that equate to the emotion you are trying to project.

MOYERS: What emotion do you feel when you look at Darth Maul?

LUCAS: Fear. You wouldn't want to meet him in a dark alley. But he's not repulsive. He's something you should be afraid of, without [his] being a monster whose intestines have been ripped out and thrown all over the screen.

MOYERS: Is the emotion you wanted from him different from the emotion you wanted from Darth Vader?

LUCAS: It's essentially the same, just in a different kind of way. Darth Vader was half machine, half man, and that's where he lost a lot of his humanity. He has mechanical legs. He has mechanical arms. He's hooked up to a breathing machine. This one is all human. I wanted him to be an alien, but I wanted him to be human enough that we could identify with him.

MOYERS: He's us?

LUCAS: Yes, he's the evil within us.

MOYERS: Do you know yet what, in a future episode, is going to transform Anakin Skywalker to the dark side?

LUCAS: Yes, I know what that is. The groundwork has been laid in this episode. The film is ultimately about the dark side and the light side, and those sides are designed around compassion and greed. The issue of greed, of getting things and owning things and having things and not being able to let go of things, is the opposite of compassion--of not thinking of yourself all the time. These are the two sides--the good force and the bad force. They're the simplest parts of a complex cosmic construction.

MOYERS: I think it's going to be very hard for the audience to accept that this innocent boy, Anakin Skywalker, can ever be capable of the things that we know happen later on. I think about Hitler and wonder what he looked like at nine years old.

LUCAS: There are a lot of people like that. And that's what I wonder. What is it in the human brain that gives us the capacity to be as evil as human beings have been in the past and are right now?

MOYERS: You've been probing that for a while now. Have you come to any conclusion?

LUCAS: I haven't. I think it comes out of a rationale of doing certain things and denying to yourself that you're actually doing them. If people were really to sit down and honestly look at themselves and the consequences of their actions, they would try to live their lives a lot differently. One of the main themes in *The Phantom Menace* is of organisms having to realize they must live for their mutual advantage.

MOYERS: Have you made peace with the fact that people read into your movies what you didn't necessarily invest there?

LUCAS: Yes, I find it amusing. I also find it very interesting, especially in terms of the academic world, that they will take a work and dissect it in so many different ways. Some of the ways are very profound, and some are very accurate. A lot of it, though, is just the person using their imagination to put things in there that really weren't there, which I don't mind either. I mean, one of the things I like about *Star Wars* is that it stimulates the imagination, and that's why I don't have any qualms about the toys or about any of the things that are going on around *Star Wars*, because it does allow young people to use their imagination and think outside the box.

MOYERS: What do you make of the fact that so many people have interpreted your work as being profoundly religious?

LUCAS: I don't see *Star Wars* as profoundly religious. I see *Star Wars* as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct--that there is a greater mystery out there. I remember when I was 10 years old, I asked my mother, "If there's only one God, why are there so many religions?" I've been pondering that question ever since, and the conclusion I've come to is that all the religions are true.

MOYERS: Is one religion as good as another?

LUCAS: I would say so. Religion is basically a container for faith. And faith in our culture, our world and on a larger issue, the mystical level--which is God, what one might describe as a supernatural, or the things that we can't explain--is a very important part of what allows us to remain stable, remain balanced.

MOYERS: One explanation for the popularity of Star Wars when it appeared is that by the end of the 1970s, the hunger for spiritual experience was no longer being satisfied sufficiently by the traditional vessels of faith.

LUCAS: I put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people--more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery. Not having enough interest in the mysteries of life to ask the question, "Is there a God or is there not a God?"--that is for me the worst thing that can happen. I think you should have an opinion about that. Or you should be saying, "I'm looking. I'm very curious about this, and I am going to continue to look until I can find an answer, and if I can't find an answer, then I'll die trying." I think it's important to have a belief system and to have faith.

MOYERS: Do you have an opinion, or are you looking?

LUCAS: I think there is a God. No question. What that God is or what we know about that God, I'm not sure. The one thing I know about life and about the human race is that we've always tried to construct some kind of context for the unknown. Even the cavemen thought they had it figured out. I would say that cavemen understood on a scale of about 1. Now we've made it up to about 5. The only thing that most people don't realize is the scale goes to 1 million.

MOYERS: The central ethic of our culture has been the Bible. Like your stories, it's about the fall, wandering, redemption, return. But the Bible no longer occupies that central place in our culture today. Young people in particular are turning to movies for their inspiration, not to organized religion.

LUCAS: Well, I hope that doesn't end up being the course this whole thing takes, because I think there's definitely a place for organized religion. I would hate to find ourselves in a completely secular world where entertainment was passing for some kind of religious experience.

MOYERS: You said you put the Force into Star Wars because you wanted us to think on these things. Some people have traced the notion of the Force to Eastern views of God--particularly Buddhist--as a vast reservoir of energy that is the ground of all of our being. Was that conscious?

LUCAS: I guess it's more specific in Buddhism, but it is a notion that's been around before that. When I wrote the first Star Wars, I had to come up with a whole cosmology: What do people believe in? I had to do something that was relevant, something that imitated a belief

system that has been around for thousands of years, and that most people on the planet, one way or another, have some kind of connection to. I didn't want to invent a religion. I wanted to try to explain in a different way the religions that have already existed. I wanted to express it all.

MOYERS: You're creating a new myth?

LUCAS: I'm telling an old myth in a new way. Each society takes that myth and retells it in a different way, which relates to the particular environment they live in. The motif is the same. It's just that it gets localized. As it turns out, I'm localizing it for the planet. I guess I'm localizing it for the end of the millennium more than I am for any particular place.

MOYERS: What lessons do you think people around the world are taking away from Star Wars?

LUCAS: Star Wars is made up of many themes. It's not just one little simple parable. One is our relationship to machines, which are fearful, but also benign. Then there is the lesson of friendship and symbiotic relationships, of your obligations to your fellow- man, to other people that are around you. This is a world where evil has run amuck. But you have control over your destiny, you have many paths to walk down, and you can choose which destiny is going to be yours.

MOYERS: I'm not a psychologist, I'm just a journalist, but it does seem to me there's something autobiographical with Luke Skywalker and his father--something of George Lucas in there.

LUCAS: Oh, yes. There is, definitely. You write from your own emotions. And obviously there are two sides to the redeemer motif in the Star Wars films. Ultimately Vader is redeemed by his children and especially by having children. Because that's what life is all about--procreating and raising children, and it should bring out the best of you.

MOYERS: So while Star Wars is about cosmic, galactic epic struggles, it's at heart about a family?

LUCAS: And a hero. Most myths center on a hero, and it's about how you conduct yourself as you go through the hero's journey, which in all classical myth takes the form of a voyage of transformation by trials and revelations. You must let go of your past and must embrace your future and figure out what path you're going to go down.

MOYERS: Is it fair to say, in effect, that Star Wars is your own spiritual quest?

LUCAS: I'd say part of what I do when I write is ponder a lot of these issues. I have ever since I can remember. And obviously some of the conclusions I've come to I use in the films.

MOYERS: The psychologist Jonathan Young says that whether we say, "I'm trusting my inner voice," or use more traditional language--"I'm trusting the Holy Spirit," as we do in the Christian tradition--somehow we're acknowledging that we're not alone in the universe. Is this what Ben Kenobi urges upon Luke Skywalker when he says, "Trust your feelings"?

LUCAS: Ultimately the Force is the larger mystery of the universe. And to trust your feelings is your way into that.

MOYERS: One scholar has called Star Wars "mysticism for the masses." You've been accused of trivializing religion, promoting religion with no strings attached.

LUCAS: That's why I would hesitate to call the Force God. It's designed primarily to make young people think about the mystery. Not to say, "Here's the answer." It's to say, "Think about this for a second. Is there a God? What does God look like? What does God sound like? What does God feel like? How do we relate to God?" Just getting young people to think at that level is what I've been trying to do in the films. What eventual manifestation that takes place in terms of how they describe their God, what form their faith takes, is not the point of the movie.

MOYERS: And stories are the way to ask these questions?

LUCAS: When the film came out, almost every single religion took Star Wars and used it as an example of their religion; they were able to relate it to stories in the Bible, in the Koran and in the Torah.

MOYERS: Some critics scoff at this whole notion of a deeper layer of meaning to what they call strictly kid stuff. I come down on the side that kid stuff is the stuff dreams are made of.

LUCAS: Yes. It's much harder to write for kids than it is to write for adults. On one level, they will accept--they don't have constraints, and they're not locked into a particular dogma. On the other side, if something doesn't make sense to them, they're much more critical of it.

MOYERS: So when you write, do you see your audience, and is that audience a 13-year-old boy?

LUCAS: I make these films for myself more than I make them for anybody else. I'm lucky that the things that I believe in and the things that I enjoy and the things that entertain me entertain a large population. Sometimes they don't. I've made a bunch of movies that nobody has liked. So that doesn't always hold true. But I don't really make my films for an audience per se. I'm hoping that a 12-year-old boy or girl will enjoy it. But I'm not dumbing it down. I think I'm making it with enough credibility so that anybody can watch it.

MOYERS: It's certainly true that Star Wars was seen by a lot of adults, yours truly included. Even if I hadn't wanted to pay attention, I realized that I had to take it seriously because my kids were taking it seriously. And now my grandkids take it seriously.

LUCAS: Well, it's because I try to make it believable in its own fantastic way. And I am dealing with core issues that were valid 3,000 years ago and are still valid today, even though they're not in fashion.

MOYERS: Why are they out of fashion?

LUCAS: Because the world we live in is more complex. I think that a lot of those moralities have been degraded to the point that they don't exist anymore. But the emotional and psychological part of those issues are still there in most people's minds.

MOYERS: What do you mean by the "emotional" side? **LUCAS:** The importance of, say, friendship and loyalty. Most people look at that and say, "How corny." But the issues of friendship and loyalty are very, very important to the way we live, and somebody has got to tell young people that these are very important values. Young people are still learning. They're still picking up ideas. They are still using these ideas to shape the way they're going to conduct their lives.

MOYERS: How do you explain the power of film to move us?

LUCAS: It takes all the aspects of other art forms--painting, music, literature, theater--and puts them into one art form. It's a combination of all these, and it works on all the senses. For that reason it's a very alluring, kind of dreamlike experience. You sit in a dark room and have this other world come at you in a very realistic way.

MOYERS: Wendy Doniger, who is a scholar of mythology at the University of Chicago, says that myths are important because they remind us that our lives are real and our lives are not real. We have these bodies, which we can touch, but we also have within us this omnipotent magical world of thought.

LUCAS: Myths tell us these old stories in a way that doesn't threaten us. They're in an imaginary land where you can be safe. But they deal with real truths that need to be told. Sometimes the truths are so painful that stories are the only way you can get through to them psychologically.

MOYERS: Ultimately, isn't Star Wars about transformation?

LUCAS: It will be about how young Anakin Skywalker became evil and then was redeemed by his son. But it's also about the transformation of how his son came to find the call and then ultimately realize what it was. Because Luke works intuitively through most of the original trilogy until he gets to the very end. And it's only in the last act--when he throws his sword down and says, "I'm not going to fight this"--that he makes a more conscious, rational decision. And he does it at the risk of his life because the Emperor is going to kill him. It's only that way that he is able to redeem his father. It's not as apparent in the earlier movies, but when you see the next trilogy, then you see the issue is, How do we get Darth Vader back? How do we get him back to that little boy that he was in the first movie, that good person who loved and was generous and kind? Who had a good heart.

MOYERS: In authentic religion, doesn't it take Kierkegaard's leap of faith?

LUCAS: Yes, yes. Definitely. You'll notice Luke uses that quite a bit through the film--not to rely on pure logic, not to rely on the computers, but to rely on faith. That is what that "Use the Force" is, a leap of faith. There are mysteries and powers larger than we are, and you have to trust your feelings in order to access them.

MOYERS: When Darth Vader tempts Luke to come over to the Empire side, offering him all that the Empire has to offer, I am taken back to the story of Satan taking Christ to the mountain and offering him the kingdoms of the world, if only he will turn away from his mission. Was that conscious in your mind?

LUCAS: Yes. That story also has been retold. Buddha was tempted in the same way. It's all through mythology. The gods are constantly tempting. Everybody and everything. So the idea of temptation is one of the things we struggle against, and the temptation obviously is the temptation to go to the dark side. One of the themes throughout the films is that the Sith lords, when they started out thousands of years ago, embraced the dark side. They were greedy and self-centered and they all wanted to take over, so they killed each other. Eventually, there was only one left, and that one took on an apprentice. And for thousands of years, the master would teach the apprentice, the master would die, the apprentice would then teach another apprentice, become the master, and so on. But there could never be any more than two of them, because if there were, they would try to get rid of the leader, which is exactly what Vader was trying to do, and that's exactly what the Emperor was trying to do. The Emperor was trying to get rid of Vader, and Vader was trying to get rid of the Emperor. And that is the antithesis of a symbiotic relationship, in which if you do that, you become cancer, and you eventually kill the host, and everything dies.

MOYERS: I hear many young people today talk about a world that's empty of heroism, where there are no more noble things to do.

LUCAS: Heroes come in all sizes, and you don't have to be a giant hero. You can be a very small hero. It's just as important to understand that accepting self-responsibility for the things you do, having good manners, caring about other people--these are heroic acts. Everybody has the choice of being a hero or not being a hero every day of their lives. You don't have to get into a giant laser-sword fight and blow up three spaceships to become a hero.

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Ready, Set, Glow!

By Richard Corliss



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CREATURE FEATURE: Phantom Menace has scores of fully digitally animated aliens, including Jar Jar Binks

A short time from now, in a galleria not far from you...the creatures will assemble in a movie-plex queue so long it might seem computer-generated. Guys as tall as Wookiees with Ewok-size children in their backpacks. Teenage girls dreaming they can be Queen Amidala, if only they had her Faberge-egg earrings. The Anakin-young and the Yoda-old, the dutiful moms and the punks with their Han Solo 'tudes--all the children of Star Wars will be waiting for magic to strike in '99, as it did in '77.

What was, will be. On May 19, Star Wars: Episode 1--The Phantom Menace opens on more than 2,500 screens. Moviemakers like their pictures to have "want-see" (tradespeak for marketable elements), but who doesn't want to see George Lucas' first of three prequels to the most popular trilogy ever filmed? Last November fans paid full ticket price to watch the film's 2-min. trailer, slept through the 3-hr. Meet Joe Black, then watched the trailer again. Internet rogues have mined many details from the script, invented the rest and splashed it on their websites. Every magazine but the New England Journal of Medicine has already put the movie on its cover. At midnight on May 3, kids will drag their parents, or vice versa, to Toys "R" Us and fill their shopping carts with Lucasian action figures. Want-see? Just try keeping them away.

But for the Starvoids--the trilogy cultists who live in the world Lucas created--this anticipation may be too fevered. It sends a little shudder through the 54-year-old gent who wrote the script alone and, for the first time in 22 years, directed a movie as well as supervised it. "Expectations are so high that no matter what, for some people we'll never make it," he says. "Everybody is trying to steal information. But if we bring out the Episode 1 book early, people get upset that we're giving the story away." Mirthless laugh. "No matter how you do it, you can't win."

Lucas is not alone in wondering if the \$115 million film on the screen will be able to top the spectacle outside; one imagines rampant ticket scalping, if not pitched light-saber battles. Can Lucas keep his huge, devout constituency awed while gently reminding them that it's only a movie? Or has all the promotional percussion deafened the audience, spilled the best secrets? Maybe moviegoers who have read stories like this one will have a slumping sense of déjà vu when Episode 1 is finally revealed.

Think that, and think again. You needn't be Return of the Jedi's evil Emperor, pregnant with prescience, to foresee smiles of delicious anticipation as the 20th Century Fox fanfare blares, the Lucasfilm logo fades and the sacred text appears: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." You needn't be a Hollywood accountant, mopey about this year's stagnant box office and praying for a Titanic-size hit, to forehear the cheers that will surely erupt halfway through the film when the Jedi knight Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) casts his laser stare on nine-year-old Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd) and intones, "May the Force be with you."

All right, any auteur can replay his greatest hits, exploiting even the youngest viewer's need for nostalgia. And, indeed, Episode 1 will display the old Lucas touches, many of them

dating back not just to the trilogy of Star Wars, The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi, but also to his first features, THX 1138 and American Graffiti. It has the gifted, driven misfit; the young woman above his station but not beyond his dreams; the mystic guide, the imposing villain, the comic sidekick. Yoda, Obi-Wan Kenobi, the evil Emperor and Darth Vader are here--all of them 30 years younger, some barely recognizable. There are lots of battles and a cool drag race. It's a George Lucas movie.

Still, based on reading the script (hasn't everybody?) and seeing scraps of the film, we get intimations of something fresh, handsome, grand. Naboo's golden underwater city glows like an Art Nouveau chandelier, while the Jedi knights' home base, Coruscant, could come from a spiffier Blade Runner. The new sidekick, a computer-birthing frog boy named Jar Jar Binks, is a vexing, endearing mix of Kipling's Gunga Din and Tolkien's Gollum, and speaks in a pidgin English ("Yousa Jedi not all yousa cracked up to be!") that will be every kid's secret language this summer. Even on paper, the film's set pieces--a 10-min. Podrace and the climactic battle between the ragged forces of good and the minions of the dark side--have power and razzmatazz.

The human characters are briskly developed in the script. And the cast is certainly tony: Neeson; art-house sex pistol Ewan McGregor as young Obi-Wan; Ingmar Bergman favorite Pernilla August as Anakin's mother; Natalie Portman (Broadway's Anne Frank) as the young Queen; and, brooding on the Jedi Council, Samuel L. Jackson. The completed film will offer definitive evidence, but for now there is reason to give Episode 1 the subtitle of the original Star Wars movie: A New Hope.

The film is set in an age tipping from medieval to modern, from the doddering aristocracy of the Galactic Republic to the brutal opportunism of the Trade Federation, which has blocked all shipping routes to the planet Naboo. Qui-Gon and his Jedi apprentice Obi-Wan are dispatched to settle the dispute. Reaching Naboo, they are befriended--hounded, really--by Jar Jar, a disaster-prone outcast of the Gungan race. He leads them to Amidala the Naboo Queen, whom they intend to take to the Republic's assembly in Coruscant. Engine trouble forces them to detour to Tatooine, where Qui-Gon bargains for spare spacecraft parts with Watto, a potbellied, hummingbird-winged junkman. In Anakin, Watto's slave boy, Qui-Gon senses an unusual precocity, one might almost say a Force. Qui-Gon makes a bet with Watto. If Anakin miraculously wins the big Podrace against the swaggering champ Sebulba, the boy will be freed. Free to chase his destiny as a Jedi knight.

That's one way to start telling the story. Here is another: One day in November 1994, George Lucas dropped his three adopted kids off at school. He came home, climbed the stairs to his study, got a pad of yellow ruled paper and a box of Ticonderoga No. 2 pencils. And in the same binder in which he wrote the original Star Wars, he got to work on The Phantom Menace.

In early 1996, Lucas invited a few trusted souls from Industrial Light & Magic, his 14-Oscar-winning special-effects unit, up to his Skywalker Ranch, north of San Francisco, and showed them 3,500 storyboards for the new film. Battle scenes, racing scenes, parades--all with thousands of characters in each shot and all to be computer generated. "Crew members said, 'It's too many shots. How are we going to do this?'" recalls ILM visual-effects supervisor John Knoll. "It was kind of scary."

The lesson in the making of Episode 1 was learning the difference between the impossible and the merely never-before-done-or-imagined. That's how an army of workaholics helped create three new computer-generated worlds, 1,200 costumes, 65 standing sets, 140 new beasts. To research Podrace vehicles, they went to the world's largest jet junkyard, outside Phoenix, and scavenged for 747 engines. They thought big (a Russian military-transport plane flew the Podracers to the Tunisian location) and cheap (a women's electric shaver serves as a Jedi comlink; the waterfalls in Naboo are...salt).

Making the original Star Wars trilogy, Lucas was forever frustrated that existing technology could not translate all his notions into compelling, realistic imagery. Today the whole palette of digital technology is much more subtle and supple; if you can dream it, you can see it. And you can play with a scene--keep reshooting it on the computer, so to speak, until it's perfect. As Lucas puts it, "An artist working on fresco had to paint everything before the plaster dried. Then oils were invented. That's what digital is to movies. You can go out in the real world and paint, then come back the next day and finish it." To makers of fantasy films, this is a pipe dream come true. "People have been talking about a digital back lot for years," says Dennis Muren, the grand wizard of the ILM staff and a senior visual-effects supervisor on Episode 1. "But George has done it."

In the end, most of the scenes were digitally created (the final Gungan battle) or enhanced (by extending the standing sets, built only 6 ft. or 7 ft. high, into palaces and Senate chambers). "A typical summer movie has maybe 2,000 shots, with, say, 250 effects shots," says Knoll. Titanic had about 500. "This one is backward. Of the 2,200 shots, only about 250 shots are not effects shots." There is just one sequence totally untouched by the digitalizers. Hint: watch for the vent.

Long before production began in the summer of 1997, two teams hunkered down to realize Lucas' vision. One was the art department, led by Doug Chiang. He and his crew cranked out some 3,000 drawings of planets, cities, swamps, creatures, racing pods, new mechanical versions of storm troopers (Lucas told Chiang to think of the elongated, skeletal shapes of African sculptures--and that did the trick). The Queen's ship is sleek chrome with streaks of yellow and fins inspired by an Art Deco pin. Fine, but would it fly? "Part of my phony-baloney research was to watch a lot of educational TV," says Chiang. "But this is film reality, not reality. Put my plane in a wind tunnel and it would fall apart."

The other crew assembled "animatics": rough computer designs of the script's scenes using stick figures, artwork, bits of film. "We previsualize the movie," says animatician David Paul Dozoretz, who was in charge of the digital whiz kids. "We're Lucas' toy box. We do lots of experimentation." Thanks to these sages and sprouts, 45 min. of Episode 1 was viewable as a computerized storyboard before principal shooting began.

Iain McCaig, a children's book illustrator, "conceptualized" the costumes--and some of the creatures inside them. For Darth Maul, the dark-side warrior who battles Qui-Gon with a prototype double-edged light saber, Lucas asked McCaig to draw his childhood nightmare come true. The artist drew one so frightening that Lucas said, "Do your second worst." That was Bozo the Clown, who had terrified McCaig as a child. "His face had long red tassels, and he had big metal teeth."



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DRESSED TO THRILL: Queen Amidala (Portman), resplendent in white beads, comes to beg for help from the duplicitous Senator Palpatine

McCaig admits he tried "to get Lucas in trouble over the hair" by designing coiffures every bit as grotty as Princess Leia's bagel buns. One of Amidala's dos looks like a fan belt, another like huge shoulder pads. He designed Amidala's raiment to be elaborate too. "George wanted the Queen so regal she could sneak out the back of the dress," he says, "and no one would know she was gone." Trisha Biggar spent a year fashioning the costumes. "It's George's first costume drama," she says. "The movie will have lots of girl appeal, especially the Queen's costumes. She has a different fancy dress for each of her eight scenes." The throne-room

dress alone took two months to complete and features globules of lights around the hem. It's a wowser.

In a movie world of many worlds, where humans interact with other intergalactic species, it just makes sense that live action should consort with puppeteering (Yoda is still voiced and manipulated by Frank Oz) and digital auteurism. So, yes, there must be real actors. It takes a real actor to stand on a bare stage and pretend it's the gigantic Galactic Senate, or to have an argument with an invisible junkman. And it takes a trusting actor to endure the secrecy attending a Star Wars production.

"It had to be a leap of faith," says Neeson. "I couldn't get a script. Forget Woody Allen--this was like trying to get into Fort Knox. I finally got to read the whole script in George's office with Darth Vader standing outside the door. Seriously." Even now, Neeson won't talk about his role, though everyone knows he's the lead in Episode 1. "I can't say," he says, unsmiling but with a flick of laughter in his eyes. "I am forbidden by my Jedi code of ethics."

To Alfred Hitchcock, actors were cattle. To Lucas, actors are pixels--visual elements whose performances can be refined in computerized postproduction. For a certain scene, Lucas liked Take 4 of one actor, Take 6 of the other; he patched the two together and digitally fixed the middle. "Most directors wouldn't manipulate the scenes as much as we've done," says film editor Paul Martin Smith. "If we don't like how it looks, we change it."

Computer-generated creatures are actors too, and Episode 1 has some of potential Oscar caliber. Watto growls and connives with the swagger of a con man who's not as smart as he thinks. Sebulba, Anakin's rival in the Podrace, walks on his hands and throttles rivals with his feet. "George said, 'Think of a spider crossed with an orangutan crossed with a sloth,'" recalls Rob Coleman, the film's animation director. Coleman would pester Lucas for backstory on obscure creatures like Sebulba, "but I've never been able to stump him. He marinates in this world of his."

Of all his "actors," Lucas is proudest of the digital Jar Jar: "We have the first photo-realistic character that acts." Jar Jar, for whom actor-dancer Ahmed Best was both the voice and a rubberized stand-in, took years to develop. "He was Tex Avery cartoonish in style," says Chiang, "with large eyes and a big mouth." He was given short ears, but Lucas insisted on long ones. The comically androgynous shape came later.

It takes a village to make a movie: all those artists prying the Phantom menagerie out of Lucas' brain. The film had tens of thousands of visual elements, and Lucas signed off on all of them; he would stamp "O.K." or "Fabuloso" on the designs he liked. "George is very collaborative," says Rick McCallum, who produced Episode 1. "But finally it's his word, his world."

The Emperor of this teeming, hugely profitable world can hear the occasional renegade whisper below his palace balcony. "Critics say the problem with George and Steven [Spielberg] is that they've created these well-made megamovies that are basically B movies," Lucas observes. "Jaws, they say, was just a big horror movie. Star Wars is just a big sci-fi film. That our films are not like The Exorcist, The Godfather and the great films of the '70s. Well, they were B movies too. And Gone With the Wind was just a soap opera." Lucas thinks of himself as a Marin County rebel against the Hollywood empire, in a cadre of Bay Area filmmakers that includes Francis Coppola, Philip Kaufman and such visionary avant-guardians of the '60s as Bruce Conner, Will Hindle and Scott Bartlett (his shorts Offon and Metanomen ushered in the digital era).

All right, what powerful man doesn't also want to be universally respected and loved? But now, sitting in a dark theater at ILM looking at his near-finished film, Lucas seems bracingly lighthearted. "What's that? White dirt on the print?" he asks. "Yeah, that's good dirt," says a wisecracker, and everybody laughs. Lucas is a genius at fussing: a sun is setting too fast in one shot, while in others, he wants light rays bouncing off buildings, more traffic, less confetti. No one acts cowed by the billionaire boss.



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LIGHT FANTASTIC: Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan in the climactic sword fight with the devilish Sith Lord Darth Maul and his double-edged light saber

Four-and-a-half years of energy and expertise guarantee nothing. Episode 1 may be no more than what composer John Williams, who has scored all four Star Wars films, expected the first one to be: "a good weekend movie." To be a big success, a movie need only work for a few weekends. It doesn't need mythic meaning; remember that for years, the all-time box-office champ was The Sound of Music. But the Star Wars saga does touch a deeper chord. "George created a transgenerational phenomenon that's still inexplicable," says Williams. "Maybe it's in the rattling of our collective memory."

McCallum thinks he knows the secret. "The story is meaningful," he says, "simply because there's an age of longing that people go through. That's what the story is about--longing, yearning. We ask ourselves, 'What's next? Can I be the person I want to be?' For some, the dream comes true. For some, it doesn't. We look at the story of Anakin Skywalker, and it makes us wonder. Is that just a cast of the die? Is it our character? Is it luck?"

It is luck, as in Luke. And Luke, as in Lucas. Sixteen years ago, he filmed the end of his space story. Now, finally, he sits at the bedside of the child inside every moviegoer, lowers the lights and tells us the beginning. "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away" really means, "Once upon a time, in your dreams..."